



## Implications for Practice: Assisting Female Veterans in their Career Development

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### ABSTRACT

“The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (2013) projects that the number of female veterans is expected to increase in the upcoming years. Although, the research specific to female veteran’s career development is sparse, a review of the literature indicates that this is indeed a topic worth attention (Mulhall, 2009; Silva, 2008; Service Women’s Action Network [SWAN], 2013). This article will focus on a synthesis of the current literature in hopes of providing some insight into the unique challenges and strengths of the female veteran population. Attention will be given to factors that directly impact female veterans’ career development, as well as provide an overview of the general characteristics associated with this population. For practitioners to begin to understand how they can most effectively work with female veterans, it is essential to have some insight into not only who they are as individuals, but who they are as service members and veterans. Anderson, Goodman, and Schlossberg’s (2012) theory of transition will also be explored as a useful lens to use when working with female veterans’ experiencing challenges in their career development.”

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- As the population of female veterans grows, it is becoming more apparent that some of the challenges female veterans face are different from the challenges of their male counterpart. For example, the unemployment rate for female veterans is at 8.2%, while the rate for male veterans is at 4.7%. In addition to higher unemployment, female veterans often also face different family concerns, career advancement, healthcare, and sexual assault experiences. This combination of stressors can create a unique burden on career development and transition from the military for female veterans. This article highlights the implications of lived military experiences on career development, and proposes several ways to alleviate stressors and ease career transition for female veterans.
- Female veterans report more negative interactions with supervisors and the absence of opportunities for promotion within the military; these negative interactions and limited opportunities for career advancement might contribute to some female veterans having lower confidence in their ability to succeed in the civilian workforce.
- Women veterans are more likely to be single parents which can add stress to the often intimidating process of entering the civilian workforce. The combined lack of social support and increased family responsibilities may inhibit a successful transition.
- To better mitigate the perceived and actual barriers to successful career transitions, these researchers recommend a holistic approach to assisting female veterans. This holistic approach to assisting female veterans with career transitions should incorporate the DoD, VA, career counselors and social support mechanisms.

## IMPLICATIONS

### FOR PRACTICE

Despite female veterans having extensive training, leadership skills, and dedication, a number of women expressed a belief that they are less likely to be promoted than men within the military. Such thinking could lead to a decline in confidence and self-efficacy. Career counselors serving female veterans should familiarize themselves with military culture, and the veteran's specific branch to better understand how to assist them in career transitions. When assisting a female veteran with employment in the civilian workforce, career counselors should remain cognizant of the various military experiences a female veteran might have faced during their service, including trauma, mental health concerns, and negative interactions with supervisors. Career counselors should utilize a holistic approach when working with veterans that considers all of the strengths and challenges of each veteran. Utilizing a holistic approach could assist in the facilitating of successful transitions to civilian careers. Career counselors should work diligently to assist female veterans in translating their valuable military skills into practical real-world applications. Counselors should encourage female veterans to identify the individual assets and inner strengths they possess and determine how they can be used to facilitate a smooth transition to a civilian career.

### FOR POLICY

Given that some female veterans perceived career opportunities to be unequal between sexes within the military, the Department of Defense might re-examine promotion potential and opportunities for career advancement for female service members. To help female veterans maintain stability after completion of their military service, the DoD and VA might implement social supports that are forged while in service and easily continue after separation. Such social supports could include programs that create a welcoming environment to discuss issues pertaining specifically to women. For example, the VA might consider forming more programs that mitigate the social impacts that affect female veterans in career transitions. Social ailments that could be addressed through the programs might include stress related to being a single parent and seeking a job, threat of homelessness, lack of social support, and low self-esteem and self-efficacy. These factors may dramatically impact future career development and inhibit successful careers. The VA might also work with homeless service providers to ensure adequate housing for female veterans and when needed, their children.

### FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Prior studies have found that female veterans have higher income than female civilians yet for male veterans, their income is lower than their civilian male counterparts. Thus, future researchers should examine the differences between income earnings among civilians and veterans by gender. Recent studies have reported that incidents of military sexual trauma have decreased in recent generations. Given that past military sexual trauma could impact a veteran's career transition and success, more research is needed on military sexual trauma and career success for both female and male veterans. Due to the recent lifting of a moratorium on women in combat roles, little is known about the impact of combat trauma and incidences of PTSD on female veterans serving in nontraditional military roles. Future studies should assess how military experiences impact career development and transitions for female veterans. It might be beneficial to use longitudinal data to track career development and transitions. To better inform career counselors of potential professional development areas for female veterans, forthcoming studies should examine female veterans' employment preferences.

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